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ABSTRACT

Fundamental differences exist between conceptualizing and operationalizing experiential education, in general, and graded speech communication internship classes-for-credit, in particular. Monitoring participation in experiential activities (including intercollegiate athletics, musical or stage production, publication of the campus newspaper, and student government) is conceptually and operationally very different from assessing learning in a graded speech communication internship. Relying on the judgment of the student's most immediate supervisor runs into problems since that person is probably not an "expert" in speech communication. Another means is to design an entire internship class to assess the quality of learning. There are several advantages to a model with regularly scheduled class meetings of all interns: (1) students seem to take the academic portion of their internships more seriously; (2) the meetings can create a mutual support network among interns and the internship director; (3) as students report their progress, achievements, and problems, other interns learn that they often have similar experiences; and (4) very directed teaching can take place. Students complete 10 short papers during the semester and present them in seminar style to the other members. Such a class incorporates sound pedagogy and simultaneously assesses learning by rigorous standards in an experiential learning context. (RS)

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Assessment in Graded Speech Communication Internships

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ASSESSMENT IN GRADED SPEECH COMMUNICATION INTERNSHIPS

One can find recent literature on speech communication experiential education (Freeman, 1986), and there is no paucity of literature on the subject of speech communication internships. There have been an abundance of survey reports, accounts of student, faculty, and administrator perspectives of internship programs, and many commentaries on how internship programs could or should be operated (Hellweg and Falcione, 1987). Two of the most recent articles suggest an increase in internship programs and provide guidance on how to maximize such programs (Powers and Klingel, 1990; and Fitch-Hauser and Padgett, 1991).

This paper links experiential education and internships. It concentrates on the importance of recognizing that there are fundamental differences between conceptualizing and operationalizing (1) experiential education, in general, and (2) graded speech communication internship classes-for-credit, in particular. The analysis is based on the premise that there are significant differences between assessing experiential activities and assessing learning within these activities. One possible model for assessing learning in graded internships is explicated.

The Nature of Experiential Education in General and Credit/No Credit Classes

By its very name, experiential education, in the broadest sense, suggests that a student is involved in some activity that enhances his/her education. For example, competitive intercollegiate activities represent experiential education, and

students often earn academic credit, in some form, for their participation in such activities; these activities include, on some campuses, intercollegiate athletics, as well as, of course, intercollegiate forensics. Students on some campuses also earn academic credit for experiential activity in musical and stage productions, publication of the campus newspaper, and student government.

The means of assessing participation in these activities probably vary greatly. In many cases, students earn credit but do not earn a grade, and in most cases, the student's participation is probably conscientiously monitored by faculty.

However, monitoring participation in activities is conceptually and operationally very different from assessing learning. Participation simply means that the student is experiencing some activity, not necessarily that s/he is learning from the experience. In different terms, assessment of experiential education in some cases may be more of a measure of the quantity than the quality of participation in terms of learning. For example, in each of the above activities, credit/no credit may be a measure of quantity: for example, the athlete, the intercollegiate forensics participant, the musician, the actor, the journalist, and the student government officer may participate in activities to an extent that warrants academic credit.

However, in these cases and perhaps in others, the quality of the participation and the amount of learning may be

overlooked. In each case a student could demonstrate conscientious, regular participation, as required. For example, the athlete could regularly attend practice and perhaps participate in intercollegiate contests, the speaker could practice and participate in intercollegiate tournaments, the journalist could write/produce, the musician and the actor could attend rehearsals and participate in productions, and the officer may attend meetings. But the assessment of such participation, both conceptually and operationally, may differ significantly from assessment of the degree to which such participation represents learning. For instance, I feel very certain that if I were to decide to play the piano, I would need to engage in practice many hours for many weeks or months before there would likely be evidence of significantly improved participation. To the extent that such improved participation were measured, learning would be represented.

Assessment of Experiential Learning with Grades

The foregoing analysis is not an indictment of the appropriateness of the many types of experiential education or of credit/no credit classes in any of the above activities. Rather it is merely an attempt to distinguish between experiential participation and experiential learning in order to focus attention on internships. Internships that are ungraded may warrant academic credit in the same way that the above activities warrant credit. However, conceptualizing and operationalizing graded speech communication internship classes-for-credit differs

from most of the above examples. It seems a fundamental assumption, for instance, that internship classes of this type differ from intercollegiate forensics. Whereas forensic participation is a very structured activity of a particular type, the parameters of internships are, of course, very wide. Thus, the means of assessment of learning in forensic activities can also be much more universally applied than in varied internship activities. In both forensics and internship activities, credit/no credit standards can be applied, but if the decision is made to assign grades to the internship experience, judgments become much more complex. In the case of internships, the complexity of assessment is a product of both the conceptualization and the operationalization of the activity.

Some conceptualize a speech communication internship as being a "real world" activity that takes place outside of the realm of "conventional" communication classes. Thus, the internship can be operationalized in a very wide variety of contexts, including the context of a student's current employment, the context of his/her involvement in social or religious organizations, or the context of participation in campus activities, such as student government. The standards of assessment would logically center on the extent to which the student experienced communication in a particular context. But the means of assessing the <u>quality</u> of the experience--the learning--is much more problematic.

One means of assessing the quality of learning is to rely

principally on the judgment of the student's most immediate "supervisor"-observer. After all, one might reason, this person presumably is an "expert" in the internship context, and therefore s/he is very qualified to assess the quality of participation. However, there are at least two problems in relinquishing this assessment of learning to the supervisor. First, while the supervisor is an expert in the context of learning, in many cases s/he is most likely not trained as a teacher, an "expert" in higher education learning. More importantly, the supervisor is most likely not trained as "expert" in speech communication. Therefore, s/he is not trained to understand how well the conceptual learning of the speech communication discipline is applied within the context. The student may conscientiously follow instructions, and s/he may even exhibit certain valued communication skills. For example, the student may exhibit excellence in interpersonal communication with peers/colleagues and in other communication skills. But the supervisor can only measure such skills in comparison to his/her experience or in comparison to other employees. Only the trained "expert" in speech communication can measure the extent to which the skills represent a high-quality operational manifestation of the concepts taught in speech communication classes.

However, the internship director is often not an "expert" in internship contexts. For example, few speech communication professors have professional training or career experience in the many contexts in which they direct internships: public

relations, politics, television, training/development, etc. Thus, it is a major challenge to the internship director to devise a means of assessing the quality of learning in a context in which s/he is probably not an "expert."

One means for the internship director to assess the quality of learning is to devise assignments in which the student demonstrates his/her ability to understand and apply conceptual knowledge of speech communication. There are probably many assignments that could demonstrate applied learning. For example, students in most internships contexts could be assigned to analyze the communication strategies and tactics that s/he employed in developing a "product," and the products could be written reports, scripts, advertising copy, letters, questionnaires, or graphic ones.

Another means for assessment of the quality of learning is to design an entire internship class to do so. The following model is a class designed to assess learning and to maximize interactive learning among interns. Like many instances of "experiments" in experiential learning, the extent to which the model has been "tested" is limited, but it represents a significant departure from a previously adopted model. The previous model relied to a very large extent on the use of a student "journal" of learning experiences and only a few meetings of interns together.

A Model for Assessing Internship Learning With a Graded Class

The model[1] has a number of advantages over alternative formats for assessment. Whereas the previous internship class model relied largely on the internship director's individual meetings with interns to review individual "journals," the present model employs regularly-scheduled (approximately bi-weekly) class meetings of all interns together. There are several advantages of such meetings. First, students seem to take the academic portion of their internships more "seriously" because they regard their learning as similar to their other "conventional" classes: the class meets consistently at a specified time in a specified place, and they are expected to be present and to be prepared to learn. Second, the meetings can function to create a mutual-support network among the interns and the internship director. A group cohesiveness, which includes the internship director, can be developed, as opposed to an adversary relationship that might result from the director critically reviewing the interns' journals in one-on-one meetings. Third, paralleling this development of cohesiveness, is interactive learning. As students report their progress, their achievements, and their problems, the other interns learn that they often have similar experiences or they can learn about problems encountered by others, which they, themselves, have been fortunate not to have encountered. These discussions also benefit the internship director by fostering candid revelations

of the kinds of experiences that individuals are having.

Another advantage of the class-meeting format is that very directed teaching can take place. The director can systematically concentrate attention on selected processes and concepts of communication and the internship/career experience. Further, s/he can adopt the systematic assessment tool of student papers that can focus attention on such factors. Examples of such papers are offered immediately below, but it is important to consider the advantages of student papers in this context. First, they offer still another means of placing emphasis on the importance of writing (an emphasis painfully perceived by most of us), and in this case the assignments are framed in the "real world" context of careers. Second, they allow the internship director to exploit the "standardized" rules of assessment that are conventionally used in the assessment of student papers. Whereas review of internship "journals" may be a valid means of assessment, its application is problematic because the contexts for interns' experience varies to a very large extent. Thus, in some cases a student may write in detail about an experience that s/he has had in one internship context, while another student may never experience a similar context. The director thus is left to attempt to apply somewhat equal standards in very different contexts. But perhaps the most important advantage is that attention can be focused on the process of communication, which is at the heart of the internship director's assessment expertise.

In the class described herein, a total of ten short papers (three to four pages each) are assigned during the semester. The nature of assigned student papers offers the internship director a great number of options, only a few of which are suggested here. Obviously the internship director is charged with the responsibility of fulfilling the functions of (1) a communication teacher and (2) an internship director. Thus, some of the papers can focus specifically on the communication process and others can focus more on the internship experience.

Student papers that focus on the communication process can have a very specific focus or they can be left somewhat "open-ended." Specific papers can focus attention, for example, on: the organizational chart of the sponsoring agency and the "informal" ("real" or "functional") organizational chart; the external image of the sponsoring organization, its "clients," and the strategies and tactics in reaching these clients; and assessment techniques employed by sponsoring agencies in accomplishing their missions through communication.

In addition to these specific foci on communication constructs, "open-ended" assignments can allow the student to select communication constructs that are particularly relevant to his/her internship. The assignment can be framed as follows:

> Write a 3-4 page paper (typed and double-spaced) that reports at least 3 communication-related experiences that you have had in your internship experience. In approximately one page, describe an experience that

> focuses on a specific communication construct or variable **THAT A NON-SPEECH COMMUNICATION MAJOR MIGHT NOT NOTICE.** Document your analysis of the experience, with appropriate citations from books, professional journals, or specific communication class lectures. Then document 2 **additional experiences.** This paper is a take-home exam; it measures: (1) What did you experience?, and (2) What do you know about communication regarding this experience?, and (3) How do you know it?

This assignment obviously demands that the student be familiar with conceptual knowledge (and is able to so document) and that s/he is able to recognize its application in the internship context.

Other assignments can focus more on the internship experience than on the process of communication.[2] For example, papers can focus on setting and monitoring goals in the internship, the quality of mentoring received, knowledge gained about the career world, etc.

Depending on the size of the class, each intern can present his/her paper in seminar style to the other members, thus offering an opportunity for discussion. Such discussion, in turn, can maximize interactive learning among class members.

Summary/Conclusion

The class described here is obviously an academically very demanding one, and it is thus responsive to a recent call to take measures to assure academic integrity in internship programs (Powers and Klingel, 1991). It functions as a good option to incorporate sound pedagogy and simultaneously assess learning by rigorous standards in an experiential learning context. Affectively, the class format invites cohesiveness among students and the internship director, and it focuses on the communication process within a wide variety of career-world contexts.

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Notes

[1] The model was adapted from a successful one employed by public relations faculty in the Journalism Department at San Diego State University, with the assistance of Dr. Susan Hellweg in the Speech Communication Department.

[2] For examples of assignments that focus both on communication and on the internship experience, see Susan A. Hellweg and Raymond L. Falcione, Internships in the Communication Arts and Sciences (Scottsdale, AR: Gorsuch Scarisbrick Pub., 1985), 63-65.